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SUBJECT: Media Reaction - Swedish Role in Afghanistan

Swedish media have recently featured a spate of articles and commentary pieces examining the Swedish presence and role in Afghanistan. Much of the introspection stems from a July 23 attack on Swedish troops in northwest Afghanistan in which no Swedes were injured, but three attackers were killed. Swedish and Finnish troops operating out of their main base, Camp Northern Lights, near Mazar-e-Sharif came under fire again on July 30 with no casualties. Excerpts of recent reporting follow.

FM Bildt: EU Should take Bigger Role in Afghanistan

On July 27, TT - Sweden's wire service - carried an article with the headline "Bildt: Bigger Role for EU in Afghanistan" reporting statements from Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt in his widely read blog that he had "great difficulty understanding" reported calls to withdraw Swedish and EU troops from Afghanistan. His blog entry entitled "Abandon? No, quite the opposite", argued for enhanced engagement, saying "I believe that the European Union can do more to help Afghanistan." In the entry, Bildt did not elaborate on the role he envisaged for the EU in Afghanistan. He said Sweden, which holds the rotating presidency of the 27-member bloc, would table a proposal after the summer. Bildt also praised recent changes to U.S. Afghanistan policy: "They have recognized the need to protect civilians, and to focus more on civil and economic measures for building peace."

Editorial: Swedish Government Must Defend Involvement

In a July 27 lead editorial entitled, "A new Vietnam?" Swedish broadsheet Dagens Nyheter argued that the war in Afghanistan can only be won with help from the civilian population, and that the Swedish government must be prepared to defend Sweden's participation when the losses mount. Excerpts follow:

"In the past week Swedish soldiers have been involved in firefights in Afghanistan. No Swedes have been injured as of yet since the violence has increased, but it is only a matter of time..."

"The government needs to be prepared for criticism. Dead Swedish soldiers will raise the question of what Swedish soldiers are doing in Afghanistan. There are a number of reasons. Sweden is a part of the international community and must take its responsibility for all nations' collective security. It is indisputable that the Taliban, during their time in control, allowed Osama bin Laden's terror network to conduct its business unhindered, and the risk is considerable that if they returned to power they would do so again."

"Afghanistan accounts for 90% of the world's opium production - opiates that are used for heroin production and smuggled to Europe. The Taliban have also systematically violated human rights, operated against their own people with brutality and are well-known for their oppression of women, which has manifested itself by their attacks against schools for girls...The threat from the Taliban remains..."

"The criticism (of the Swedish government) will increase. But the war in Afghanistan is not a colonial war, but is aimed at self-rule and a democratic Afghanistan. It is also about international

security, but it can only be won with the Afghans support. Otherwise the risk is great that it develops into a repeat of the Vietnam War - this time with Swedish soldiers on the front lines."

Op-Ed: Politicians Must Show Stronger Support for Troops

In a July 28 op-ed in Dagens Nyheter entitled "Support our Troops" Former DN Political Editor Niklas Ekdal criticizes Swedish politicians' weak support for the military after they have deployed it. Excerpts follow:

"...In modern times there has been a price to pay for being non-aligned. When those in charge do not take a position the troops risk receiving criticism no matter how they act. When governments say one thing to the people, but do something else on the international scene, the troops get left in the balance without a safety net."

"This phenomenon has expressed itself differently over the years. Traumatized (Swedish) UN soldiers were forgotten for a long time without honors or enough support. When the (Swedish) troops were to be sent to the Balkans a Swedish Minister of Defense demanded that they not have "combat tasks". In Afghanistan our governments have pretended that the Swedish effort can be separated from the U.S. effort, and as soon as something goes wrong the responsibility is kicked downward, to the Armed Forces' leadership, instead of at the political level where it belongs."

"After the escalation of violence in Afghanistan and the attacks in the past few days where Swedes were involved in the killing of three Taliban, these questions have come to the forefront. The lack of political responsibility and popular support has dangerous consequences. It is nonchalant to the personnel who are risking their lives, and it makes recruitment to the Armed Forces more difficult. It breeds bad morale and increased risk; if one well-aimed attack or a different constellation in the parliament would be enough for Sweden to pull out."

"Foreign Minister Carl Bildt has argued well on his blog, but he is far too alone in his comments. "Support our troops" is a mantra that one hears in the U.S. that shows that the nation stands behind the soldiers that the U.S. as a democratic country sends out into the world. Why are Swedish politicians ashamed to say something similar? Why do they not take their full responsibility for their decisions and explain the purpose behind having troops in military missions in foreign countries?"

"A quick look at the map and history books shows that the US cannot solely solve the problems in Afghanistan, no matter how many troops they send, or how many Taliban they bomb.... If the international coalition gets the same image as their imperial forerunners the mission is over. It was right to stop al-Qaeda and its Taliban hosts after the terror attacks of 9/11, right to try and assist the re-building of the country, but it is not possible to bomb freedom into existence..."

"...there exists a UN mandate, international responsibilities and good humanitarian intentions of which Sweden is a part. In this case it is imperative that the troops have the nation's support... Explain to the citizens what the military effort entails and that it is decided by the developments in Afghanistan, not the elections in Sweden 2010. Give the Swedish soldier and officers the recognition they deserve."

Op-Ed: Defence Minister Lays Out Case for Involvement

In a July 29 op-ed in Dagens Nyheter, shortly after returning from meeting Defense Secretary Gates and other officials in Washington, Swedish Minister of Defence Sten Tolgfors laid out for the public "This is why Swedish soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan." His bottom line was that "we are in Afghanistan for the sake of the Afghans and ourselves." Excerpts follow:

"Their (Afghans) freedom is being threatened by forces who want to destroy the coming election with violence. Swedish soldiers, together with troops from 40 countries, are making an important effort under a UN mandate so that the elections on August 20th can be conducted in a safe way. Sweden is also in Afghanistan for

Sweden's own security. It is not possible to let the country fall apart and let it be taken over by terrorists."

"Many countries have been targeted by terrorism that has its roots in Afghanistan, but it has not been said enough that those who have suffered the most are Afghanistan's civilians."

"Today Afghanistan is a country where 2 million girls go to school, but schools are still torched, schoolgirls threatened and subjected to attacks by the opposition. Recently, acid was sprayed on a group of schoolgirls. Today, 80% of the country's population has access to basic health services. Before the international effort it was 8 percent. Today Afghanistan has a democratically elected President and government. On August 20, a new election will be held in Afghanistan. That is one reason for the escalation of violence. The forces that are opposed to freedom, the equal treatment of men and women and democracy have as their goal to destroy the elections through threats and violence."

"Another purpose with the violence is to get the West to question its presence in the country. Without the efforts of ISAF, which has a UN mandate, Afghanistan would fall back into civil war, oppression and dictatorship."

"Sweden is in Afghanistan for the Afghan people's security. For the conviction that respect human rights and freedoms is a universal human right. Sweden is in Afghanistan because the conflict must be seen in a regional context. The conflict is not limited to Afghanistan, but is closely tied to the troubles in Pakistan."

"Sweden is in Afghanistan because it affects Sweden's own security. The acts of September 11, 2001 showed that in today's globalized world it is not possible to allow a country fall apart so that it is taken over by groups that allow terrorist organizations. On the contrary, regional problems can become so large that they have a global impact."

"...Sweden welcomes the new US strategy for Afghanistan..."

"The efforts in Afghanistan are not without risk to the personnel there. If that risk was not present there would be no need to send troops... It is central that the elections on August 20 can be conducted safely. It is important that a broader civilian-military cooperation effort is achieved. If this is successful, the country's population can see that the development is going in the right direction and that the efforts are bearing fruit. That creates the foundation for a stable Afghanistan in the future."

Poll: Majority of Swedes Support Involvement in Afghanistan

A poll released on July 28, by independent broadcaster TV4 showed that more than half of Swedes agree with the government's decision to send soldiers to Afghanistan. The new poll by Novus Opinion reveals:

Support for the Swedish presence in Afghanistan is greatest among men and conservative voters.

63 percent of men think sending Swedish troops to the country is a good idea, compared to 35 percent of women. Likewise, 67 percent of conservative voters support the troops' presence, while only 41 percent of socialist bloc voters do.

Op-Ed: Central Asia Problems will come to Europe if no Action

A July 31 op-ed in Swedish broadsheet Svenska Dagbladet by Mark Rhinard and Erik Brattberg of the Swedish Foreign Affairs Institute, entitled "The EU must do more for Central Asia" called for greater EU contributions to stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan to avoid drug-trafficking, migration and radicalism problems reaching Europe.

Excerpts follow:

"...The EU has good possibilities to aid Central Asia, and has good reasons for doing so when its own security is at stake..."

"If nothing is done, the problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan, along with the neighboring Central Asian countries, will sooner or later reach Europe. The EU should therefore adopt a more comprehensive strategy for the region..."

"While the US puts great emphasis on military solutions, the EU can instead use the many tools it has access to in order to improve democracy, the rule of law and education in the entire region..."

"Finally, the EU should use its credibility and its economic influence to engage other powers who have interests in the region, such as China and Russia, to engage in a dialogue and cooperation around common goals and solutions for the region at large..."

"Sweden should forcefully push the issue of a common long-term strategy for Central Asia during its chairmanship. It is not only Central Asia's future that is at stake; for every day that passes it is becoming clearer that Europe's future is as well."

SILVERMAN